LET'S NOT LET JESUS GET AWAY AGAIN
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Psalm 24
Mark 6:1–13

"Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary
and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon,
and are not his sisters here with us?"
Mark 6:3 (NRSV)

O loving God,
to turn away from you is to fall,
to turn toward you is to rise,
and to stand before you is to abide forever.
Grant us, dear God,
in all our duties your help;
in all our uncertainties your guidance;
in all our dangers your protection;
and in all your sorrows your peace;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Augustine of Hippo (354–430)

Garrison Keillor recently granted a newspaper reporter a rare glimpse of his private life in St. Paul, Minnesota, where he works much of the time and lives with his wife and daughter. He picked the reporter up at the airport himself and told her he'd like to begin by showing her around the city, his hometown. He took her to one of his favorite places in St. Paul, an outdoor sculpture of Lucy, the wonderful antagonist to Charlie Brown in the ever-popular—and continuingly popular—cartoon strip, Peanuts.

Lucy keeps Charlie Brown rooted in reality, keeps him from becoming a victim of his own hopeless idealism, Lucy who every fall holds the football for Charlie Brown's place kick and as he approaches, full speed, always pulls it away at the very last second. causing him to fall on his back, a rude dose of life's consistent reality. The cartoon's brilliant originator was the late Charles Schultz, a native of St. Paul. Keillor likes the sculpture of Lucy because it reminds him that Charles Schultz first presented the concept for what became the most popular cartoon ever to the local newspaper and was rejected. It wasn't imaginative, clever, or very funny, the editor of his

hometown newspaper told him. The sculpture is a reminder, Keillor said, that your hometown can do that to you on occasion. Sometimes we miss something important and lifesaving, something beautiful, something life changing because it is so ordinary, so familiar.

Parker Palmer is a fine Quaker theologian who writes books, lectures, and leads workshops and retreats for church groups, nonprofits, and major corporations. He is much in demand and very busy. A few years ago he was visiting his mother, who at the time was in her eighties. She didn't quite understand what her son was doing for a living, why he didn't have a real 9-to-5 job. Palmer explained patiently that he visits churches and universities and corporations and lectures and conducts workshops. "I see," she said. "You talk to people and they pay you for it." "That's right, Mother. I talk and they pay me. That's what I do for a living." "Well," she said, "Parker, I like it when you come to visit and talk to me, but I certainly wouldn't pay you to do it."

One day Jesus returned to his hometown for a visit. Everyone knew him, Mary's son, the carpenter. It wasn't a large place—maybe a few hundred people.

In Nazareth everyone knew everyone. The assumption is that Joseph must have died when Jesus was a boy and that Jesus assumed responsibility for the business and the care of his mother and younger brothers and sisters. Everyone knew him. He had attended synagogue with Joseph on the sabbath. He learned the Hebrew language of his people in that synagogue, learned to read the Torah, the Psalms and Prophets in Hebrew even though he spoke Aramaic, as they all did. When Joseph died, Jesus continued to go to the synagogue, now bringing along his younger brothers, James and Joses and Judas and Simon, seeing to it that they learned to read as well.

Then, when he was about thirty, he left Nazareth. They said he had fallen under the influence of his cousin John, known as the Baptist, a fiery preacher who lived in the wilderness and baptized people in the river. Jesus himself had been baptized, they said, and then disappeared in the wilderness for a while, the dry, arid, rocky desert. They said that he had become quite a rabbi: he had disciples of his own now, and they traveled through the small villages and countryside of Galilee. He was quite a teacher, they said. He had healed many people, made the lame walk and the blind see. They said he was so popular that crowds gathered wherever he taught and many followed wherever he went.

Now he had come home. He stayed with Mary and his brothers and sisters in the house Joseph had built for them long ago. And on the sabbath he went back to the synagogue. The leaders, the elders, invited him to read and teach, and he did.

No minister reads this little story without remembering the first time he or she returned home after ordination and was invited to preach in the church and to the congregation in which he or she grew up. Your parents are there. Aunts and uncles and grandparents come for the occasion. Your old Sunday School teachers are there, the ones you tormented as an adolescent with your inattentiveness and refusal to stop talking. Your old neighbors are there, the ones who watched you grow up, who knew more about you than you were now comfortable with them knowing. Your old coach, scoutmaster, math teacher, the ones who knew you at your best and, sadly, at your worst. Magdeleine Bair was there, large, intimidating school teacher, with a voice as penetrating, loud, and clear as a bell, who never smiled, whose glare was consistently disapproving, who probably never heard of positive reinforcement as a pedagogical tool, who badgered me for years to slow down and speak distinctly if I wished to be heard, and who on a hot summer Sunday like this one, after my first sermon in my home church, looked me in the eye and said, “You’re still talking too fast. Slow down if you wish to be heard”—and smiled.

It is quite an occasion. They handed Jesus the scroll to read, and when he commented on the passage—that is to say, when he preached his first sermon in his hometown synagogue—they asked one another, “Where does he get all that? Who does he think he is? He may be big down in Galilee, but here he is still Jesus, the carpenter, Mary’s boy.”

They were offended by him, perhaps by what he said, perhaps by what they thought was his presumptuousness. Whatever the reason, their attitude was effective. “He could do no deed of power there,” Mark tells us. And so far as we know, he never went home again.

The incident reminds us that encouraging, supporting the children, the young, is one of the reasons for families and for churches. Ross Snyder, who taught at Chicago Theological Seminary and was one of the earliest proponents of what we know as Family Systems, used to say that a family is where you can count on people being on your side, a place where you are always welcome, accepted, a matrix of individuals whom you can depend on supporting you.

Do take a few minutes this morning to visit the extraordinary photograph exhibit in the hall gallery. An inventive teacher at Schiller School, one of the Chicago Public Schools that serves Cabrini-Green and with which Fourth Church works in our Near North Cluster program, gave six eighth-grade girls and one second-grade girl disposable cameras, assigned them to take pictures, and then write a few sentences.

The result is amazing, powerful. There are pictures of the buildings of Cabrini, in various stages of disrepair and disintegration, some in the process of being torn down. Though they didn't mean to, their pictures are a graphic indictment of a social-political system that was racist to its core and shameless in its treatment of the poor.

Instead, they took pictures of their home.

Tanisha McTiller, thirteen, took a picture of a particularly devastated, ugly building and wrote, "Yum! . . . The building looks so nasty and dirty. But to me the building smells like Grandma's apple pie because she used to live in the building and it brings back memories."

Ross Snyder taught that if your own family doesn't work that way, you better go get one—and that that's one of the things the church should be about: supporting, accepting, encouraging.

Have you noticed in the personal profiles of many, if not most, popular African American vocalists—Nancy Wilson, my favorite, for one—the church, the choir, is where they received the initial encouragement to launch a career, the acceptance and love that gave them the confidence to sing publicly?

It is why this congregation invests in the Tutoring and Scholarship Program. It is why we have twenty-nine youngsters placed in eighteen Chicago businesses this summer in a job training program, learning the very basic workplace skills, beginning with "Get up, dress up, show up." It is why we have 122 urban youngsters here every day this month in our Summer Day Program, for nutritious meals, academic enrichment, computer skills, and field trips—and beneath it all, the life-giving message that you are a child of God, that you matter to God and to us, that God has high hopes for you and so do we.

One of our staff persons told me about a field trip to Ravinia. On the long bus ride home, she sat down beside a little boy who seemed to be by himself. She asked him several questions, and after satisfying himself that she was genuinely interested in him, he started to talk—and talked and talked and talked, pretty much nonstop for an hour. She concluded that nobody much paid attention to him, and when he had a captive audience, someone who would listen, he wasn't going to waste the opportunity.

I am struck also that the good people of Nazareth missed something very important because they thought they already knew what they needed to know. This is not in any way a critique of their particular religion, because all religions share the sense that "we have the truth, the truth has been

given to us, and we know what we need to know." We don't need anything more, thank you very much.

They knew what the Messiah looked like. They and their ancestors had been waiting for centuries. In their own day, messianic expectation focused on a military leader who would rally the nation, rise up in revolt, drive the hated occupying Romans into the sea; he would be a political leader in the mold of David who would unite the nation and reestablish the monarchy. It never occurred to them that God would come among them in someone as ordinary as Jesus, the carpenter, Mary's son.

Barbara Brown Taylor says, "God is all around us, speaking to us through the most unlikely people. Sometimes it is a mysterious stranger, but more often, I suspect, it is people so familiar that we simply overlook them—our own children and parents, our own friends and neighbors, all those hometown prophets who challenge us and love us and tell us who we are" (*Bread of Angels*).

"Startle us, O God" is the way I like to begin the sermon, and it's for my sake as well as yours, because I think it is the very nature of religion to conclude that it has all the truth anyone of us needs and that God has already said everything that needs to be said. I think it is the very nature of religion to focus on its own piety and rituals, its creeds and books of theology, and to regard it, all of it, as all any of us needs.

And here comes Jesus, asking his old neighbors and us to think anew, to follow into new places, to do things we never did before, to care more and love more and give more and be more than we ever imagined possible.

"Let's not let Jesus get away from us again," Barbara Brown Taylor says.

Faith is not so much believing certain ideas to be true as it is listening to him and following him by loving and serving our neighbors, extending his unconditional, inclusive love to everyone we encounter, trusting him with our very lives, and never missing the opportunity to claim him as our Lord and Savior and to live all our days as his grateful people.

All praise to him. Amen.